



East Central Europe as a Historical and Conceptual Space: On the Production of Knowledge from an (Historical) Area Studies Perspective

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In this chapter, I would like to discuss how “East Central Europe” has been conceptualised in historical, cultural, and social science discourses, and how it can be fruitfully applied for a self-reflexive analysis of the history of the region. Because East Central Europe is characterised by multiple periphery-centre relations it may be viewed as a perfect site for researching processes of interconnectedness and entanglements, while highlighting the consequences of specific knowledge-power constellations that are central in postcolonial studies. East Central Europe is in a position of “in-between peripherality” (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1999) in several respects. It is seen as an integral part of Europe—especially in the self-description of local actors, but usually also in the perception of Western Europe. However, this affiliation is by no means unambiguous. This is evident in how East Central Europe hints at its “own easts” (Zarycki 2014) in order to further demonstrate its belonging to Europe. On the

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other hand, it is Europe that needs “the East” to reassure itself of its civilisational superiority (Neumann 1999). A postcolonial perspective can help with the examination of these exchange relations and dependencies which can hardly be described as unambiguous.

These power relations play a significant role when it comes to the respective positions of Eastern Europe, East Central Europe, and South-eastern Europe in relation to the idea of Europeanness. It is not only from an economics-based theory of world system that marks these regions as semi-peripheries (Wallerstein 1976). At the same time, these regions have counted, albeit with restrictions, as part of the (Western) European/North Atlantic centre from a cultural and historical perspective, or, rather, have defined themselves very strongly in relation to this centre. This relationality is of great importance for the positioning of the regions in space and, also, time: East Central Europe is not essentially different and has endeavoured to align itself to Europe in order to enjoy the cachet of Europeanness. This does not say anything about the historical development of the centre and its historical specificity, but it certainly establishes the *topos* of backwardness for the description of the semi-periphery (Hirschhausen et al. 2019, 376–377).

Recent methodological considerations, therefore, look for concepts that elaborate the intrinsic values of historical regions without essentialising them because it is not about the description of fixed spaces, but about the fact that concepts of space must always be thought of as transformative, in the sense that critical geographer Doreen Massey has described: “Spatial form as ‘outcome’ (the happenstance juxtapositions and so forth) has emergent powers which can have effects on subsequent events. Spatial form can alter the future course of the very histories that have produced it” (Massey 1992, 84). Having this observation in mind, I would like to make a strong claim for the further use of space-related historical and social research with regard to East Central Europe. But, in doing so, I do not wish to return to old battles focusing on which territories comprise Central or East Central Europe, how these spatial concepts are to be defined, and where exactly the borders to a Western or Eastern Europe run. The debate on whether we need university-based or generally institutionalised research on East Central Europe at all is still ongoing, proving that the region’s complexity cannot be easily contained in fixed conceptual and methodological frames. The critics of the spatial concept argued for a more methodologically oriented preoccupation with concrete spaces and, above all, actors. The proponents, on the other hand, referred

to the pragmatic representation of the “lands between” (Palmer 1970) in a European history.¹

The aim of this chapter is to reflect on the ways in which the study of East Central Europe as a region, characterised by heterogeneity and changing allegiances, has received innovative impulses from the use of research concepts from postcolonial studies that were not initially developed for this part of the world. I also pose the question of the extent to which these approaches can be heuristically sharpened. I am convinced that already established methodological approaches pertaining to East Central Europe contain perspectives that are certainly compatible with postcolonial studies or can even create a new research field within global postcolonial studies. At the same time, one has to bear in mind that the underlying history of academic disciplines related to East Central Europe is itself permeated to a certain extent by colonial thinking and hence needs a critical re-evaluating.

WHAT'S NEW ABOUT AREA STUDIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

If we look at the debate about the relevance and the heuristic value of area studies concerning Central and Eastern Europe, we can discern a significant shift in the discussions over the last three decades. The end of the Iron Curtain segregation in 1989 and the increasing impact of globalisation on the topics and methods of the cultural and social sciences have had a lasting effect on the self-image of area studies relating to the Eastern part of Europe. The continued necessity of maintaining this geopolitical category was fundamentally questioned after the disappearance of the Cold War divide. The increasing relevance of non-European regions in the cultural and social sciences is another challenge. The clearer it becomes that globalisation cannot be described as an extension of “European” or “Western” patterns to the entire world, but rather as a history of exchange and interdependence, the more important the knowledge produced by area studies becomes (Hirschhausen et al. 2019, 387–389). Global history has long abandoned the idea that there are universal cultural or political

¹ See the debate in the *Journal of Modern European History* 16/1 (2018) and 16/3 (2018). On the other hand, recent handbooks do not bother too much about a precise location of “East Central Europe” but just refer to the “territory from Russia in the east to Germany and Austria in the west” (Lizeveanu and Klimo 2017).

patterns. Rather, it examines how new developments emerge from the contact of different historical contexts and experiences. It is for this reason that knowledge production about different world regions is absolutely necessary for the writing of a history of globalisation.

Just recently, the debate over regional studies has flared up again, generating new arguments. Featuring the concept of the “global East,” the geographer Martin Müller argues for a “strategic essentialism” that adheres to a homogenising concept of the “East” in order to make use of the heuristic added value that arises from the East’s semi-alterity and liminal position. The East is thus no longer to be a concrete space, but “a means of transforming knowledge production” (Müller 2020, 750), bringing actors not so much “at the margins” but rather “at the interstices” of geopolitical imaginations to the fore (*ibid.*, 749). However, from the perspective of historiography or anthropology, such a levelling of spatial differences seems problematic. Accordingly, Jan Kubik argues for a “contextual holism”: he stresses the relevance of local experiences and the acknowledgement of specific historical legacies as indispensable objects of investigation in an area studies approach (Kubik 2020, 53–60). This context-related approach seems particularly suitable for a region like East Central Europe which was shaped by asymmetrical relations in which colonial and imperial structures became historically powerful, and for which, due to its proximity to or affiliation with (Western) Europe, the linkage of knowledge and power relations were particularly central. For Müller, talking about an East differentiated into sub-regions (Central, East Central, Eastern Europe) means seeing these regions as “stuck in eternal transition,” and concepts like Central Europe suggest that a teleological perspective of approaching the “true” Europe predominates (Müller 2020, 736). In the following I would like to make a strong case for “East Central Europe,” as both a heuristic and spatial concept, without describing it one-dimensionally as an entity with fixed structural or discursive characteristics.

A GENEALOGY OF AREA STUDIES IN TWO POSTWAR PERIODS

The recent debate on East Central Europe as a heuristically meaningful category is part of a long tradition of reflection. It is important to keep in mind that these debates never had and continue not to have a purely academic grounding but have been more often than not

an effect of (geo)political attributions or intentions. As early as in the interwar period, historians from East Central Europe (Oskar Halecki and Marcei Handelsman from Poland, Jaroslav Bidlo and Joseph Pfitzner from Czechoslovakia) discussed criteria for an internal division of Europe and searched for parameters that made it possible to ascribe a historically and structurally based commonality to the states in East Central Europe that had re-emerged or had been newly founded after 1918. That is, the features which clearly distinguished this region from “Eastern Europe” that was distinctively shaped by traditions of the Orthodox Church, different traditions of political domination and social structures (Kłoczowski 1995; Troebst 2003).

The historians’ discussion of the interwar period reflected not only structural-historical parameters, but also the changed map of Europe after the collapse of the great European empires during or shortly after World War I, as well as the transformation of the Russian Empire into the Soviet one. The latter’s substantial increase in power as a result of World War II and the precarious geopolitical position of East Central Europe, which was affected by German fascism and Soviet Stalinism during and after World War II, further fuelled thinking about this region. It resulted, for instance, in Halecki’s book *Borderlands of Western Civilization* (Halecki 1952) that continued his reflections of the 1920s and 1930s during the Cold War constellation and the political division of Europe. In the late phase of the Cold War, the Hungarian historian Jenő Szücs outlined “The Three Historical Regions of Europe” (Szücs 1983). Looking eastwards, he pointed out, similarly to Halecki, the significance of the confessional dividing line as a region-shaping factor. With regard to the difference between East Central Europe and Western Europe, he emphasised the structures of the “second serfdom” that had become entrenched since the early modern period. This is what he sees as the reason for the slowed socio-economic modernisation, which has continued to have an effect up to the present day.

An interesting example of the close interweaving of methodological reflections on the one hand and historical-political considerations on the other is provided by historical research on Eastern Europe in Germany. Since the time of its institutionalisation at the universities in the late nineteenth century, it has seen itself as being distinctly close to politics. As a result, until the collapse of the imperial order following World War I, the focus was primarily on the Russian Empire as the most relevant political actor east of the German Empire. Only in the period between the

two World Wars did the smaller states of East Central Europe also come into focus, but mainly against the background of unresolved minority conflicts and German revisionist territorial claims (Oberkrome 1993; Hettling 2003). During the National Socialist era and during World War II, a number of German scholars placed themselves at the service of the German expansionist policy and supported the war of aggression (and of extermination) with publications that historically legitimised the political hegemony of the German Reich in that region and ultimately also helped to justify the German policy of deportation and extermination of Jewish and Slavic people with dubious socio-historical or openly racist concepts (Burleigh 1988; Fahlbusch and Haar 2007).

These historical burdens had a significant influence on the development of research on Eastern Europe after World War II. On the one hand, there were historians such as Werner Conze, who now turned formerly *völkisch* concepts into approaches that could be described as structural history (*Strukturgeschichte*) (Etzemüller 2001). The methodological innovation helped the historians who had participated, with their publications, in the National Socialist extermination policy to transform highly problematic concepts such as “genetically healthy peasantry” into seemingly neutral social history concepts of class or impersonal macro processes. With regard to the German Empire of the late nineteenth century, Conze analysed structural processes of modernisation, state-building and nationalisation that had mobilising effects not only for the elites, but for all strata of the population in culturally, linguistically and denominationally mixed regions. For instance, in the Polish-German contact zones in the Prussian East, he referred to these processes as “nation-building through separation” (Conze 1983). After World War II, Conze was considered to be one of the founders of modern structural history that would later become social history in Germany. However, to the extent that he and his colleagues turned their attention to the major processes of modernisation, Eastern Europe lost importance in a historiography that increasingly prioritised the category of time over that of space. Social history became concerned with temporalised processes (industrialisation, urbanisation, etc.) and gave little importance to the spatial dimensions of history. Temporal development processes seemed to be of more importance. These were studied primarily for Western Europe, while the eastern part of the continent was assigned the role of the backward “other.”

In a volume dedicated to the potential of a postcolonial perspective on the region, it is paramount to recall another strand of historiography on Eastern Europe that one could describe as *postcolonial studies avant la lettre*. It turns out that it is not only since the imperial or colonial turn of the 2000s that imperial contact zones have proven to be particularly productive for questions of a history of entanglements and interactions. By emphasising the aspect of relational history (*Beziehungsgeschichte*), German historian Klaus Zernack broke with historiographical traditions, which regarded East Central Europe, and Poland in particular, in the worst case as a kind of imperial enlargement area or at best, as a territory that could be described as in a constant catching-up process in relation to a more advanced “West.” In his writings, he broke away not only from the attitude of assumed German superiority, which in itself was already a huge progress with regard to the political perspective on Eastern Europe in postwar Western Germany, and from a Prussian-centric paradigm which had long dominated German historiography dealing with its Eastern neighbour, but he also developed German-Polish history into a research paradigm that worked as an antidote to teleological temporalisation. Instead of solidifying backwardness narratives, modernisation could now be described as a differentiated and entangled process (Zernack 1974). With his relational-historical approach, Zernack in a way anticipated the premises of a history of entanglements developed since the 1990s that pointed to the importance of imperial peripheries for the often ambivalent processes of modernisation of the political centre. At the same time, he was obviously part of larger methodological developments of his time and thus strongly influenced by a structural-historical approach that dominated history writing during the 1970s and 1980s. He attributed a set of categories to Eastern Europe (divided into four sub-regions: East Central Europe, Northeastern Europe, Southeastern Europe, and Russia) and explained the historical differences within the European continent with the lasting impact of, for instance, denominational belonging, structure of property relations, forms of serfdom or consequences of geopolitical positioning (Zernack 1977). With this structural-historical approach, he also wanted to strengthen a historiography related to Eastern Europe that was based on more or less objective criteria instead of ideological opinions in order to clearly distinguish himself from the politically contaminated historiography of the war and pre-war periods.

I would argue that already in the 1970s and 1980s, when historiography was dominated by structural approaches, the preoccupation with East Central Europe opened new perspectives that, in a way, were closer to cultural history or to the language sensitivity of postcolonial studies. Generally speaking, historians who deal with this region know the dilemma of assigning terms to historical contexts that are based on Western examples and are therefore only partially suitable for the actual object of investigation. I want to posit that a relational history (*Beziehungsgeschichte*) could furthermore help us use categories in a more reflective manner. We cannot simply do without them, but we also need to avoid using them as matrices suiting all contexts. Moreover, relational history has taught us to understand conceptual categories in a process-oriented rather than an essentialist way. Just as E. P. Thompson pointed out in the context of the social history of the English working class that class is not something fixed that characterises individuals, but rather develops between actors (Thompson 1963), the German-Polish relational history shows that nationality is not something that is embodied, but is produced in historically describable processes.

“1989” AND THE “SPATIAL TURN”

After the *annus mirabilis* of 1989, we again observed a coincidence of macro-political developments and methodological reconfigurations. During the 1990s one influential master narrative of politics declared “a return to Europe” of those parts of the continent which had been within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This political boom coincided with a general shift in the methodologically conservative area studies (which was still focused on fixed regions characterised by structures). As a field based on fragmenting the world, area studies at that time no longer seemed to match the accelerated globalisation of networked societies, which fundamentally challenge the concept of centre-periphery relations. In 1997, a group of mostly Chicago-based scholars who were mainly concerned with non-European regions (and particularly with South Asia) delivered a “white paper” for the Ford Foundation, the institution that contributed significantly to the creation of area studies as a field of research whose mission was to provide political expertise after World War II. In this text, the existing concept of area studies received a rather critical evaluation: “The trouble of much of the paradigm of area studies as it now exists is that it has tended to mistake

a particular configuration of *apparent* [original emphasis, CK] stabilities for permanent associations between space, territory, and cultural organization" (Globalization Project 1997, 2). The authors argued to move away from what they call "trait" geographies that in a way resemble the above-described ideas of a structural history concerned with Eastern Europe towards "process" geographies (*ibid.*, 1) that are shaped by interactions and entanglements, and emerge situationally depending on the specific research question. Apart from advocating a more processual approach and a strong plea for a more attentive acknowledgement of voices "from the region," the authors also discuss the relevance of already existing knowledge about areas under investigation. They underline that these bodies of knowledge cannot be seen as stable or factual but as "artefacts" (*ibid.*, 5) that should be critically re-examined and integrated into a new "constructivist' architecture" (*ibid.*, 6) of area studies.

Transferring these claims to area studies concerned with Eastern and East Central Europe, it may be noted that scholars have initially adopted the constructivist turn rather than thinking in terms of processes and interactions—even though both recommendations held equal weight in the "white paper." This is particularly true for the 1990s and early 2000s, when discourse-related research had its heyday in East European studies. Researchers at that time looked at the production of knowledge about Eastern Europe and pointed to the long-lasting effectiveness of literary and scholarly attributions (Wolff 1994; Goldsworthy 1998). In some cases, one of the founding concepts of postcolonial studies, Edward Said's Orientalism (Said 1978), has also been used as a kind of starting point, as in the case of Maria Todorova, who with the concept of "Balkanism" refined Said's approach pointing at the ambivalences in Europe's representation of itself and the Southeastern "other" (Todorova 1997). In this context, the reference was made not only to the reality-shaping function of texts, but also of maps, and a perspective on spatiality was developed based on the concept of mental maps (Schenk 2002). But somehow this historiography, which focused mainly on textual/discursive imaginations, appeared to be in some way lifeless: the actors with their experiences that had been actively involved in shaping and perceiving space seemed to disappear behind the overwhelming power of imaginations of space. Talking about an invented Eastern Europe and imagined differences leaves the researcher who is interested in processes of differentiation very often dissatisfied. Nevertheless, the spatial turn at the start of the millennium proved to be an important paradigm shift in research on Eastern

and East Central Europe. It not only emphasised the power of cognitive maps, but also because researchers like Karl Schlögel (2003) pointed to the history-shaping power of the category of space—taking into consideration how geographical specificities affected historical developments in general and experiences of the actors in particular.

EASTERN EUROPE IN A GLOBALISED SCIENCE

While research concerned with East Central Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century still tended to surrender to the cogent power of texts and maps, and thus conformed to the constructivist architecture of area studies, the world changed rapidly in the post-Cold War constellation. With the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the advancing political integration of Eastern Europe into the European Community, the danger became apparent that this part of the continent might become a blind spot in the attention economy of scholarship because it no longer represented a constituent “Other.” Fortunately, this led to innovative thinking about how East Central Europe could not only be seen as an “application example” for more general theories developed elsewhere but could itself contribute to theory production. To this end, East Central Europe was increasingly thought of as part of a global history that was not conceived in terms of large “civilisations,” but, rather, in terms of processes of interdependence and exchange. In what follows, I would like to talk briefly about the expediency of placing the academic study of East Central Europe in larger research contexts in order to emphasise the heuristic productivity of this branch of research.

We could start from the assumption that the spatial turn in cultural studies may seem problematic for East Central Europe, where the idea of historical “progress” has been spatialised in the past and entails the danger that those regions will still be understood in an essentialist manner and categorised as backward. At the same time, however, the study of the foundations and discourse of this narrative of progress offers an excellent opportunity to understand East Central Europe as part of a global history, as Jürgen Osterhammel points out in his seminal book about the global nineteenth century when he identifies notions of time as a particularly suitable example for global intercultural comparisons. It is precisely the conceptions of time of the European philosophy of history since the last third of the eighteenth century that had excluded not only Asian, but also other allegedly “history-less” peoples such as the Slavs

from the European space of time (*Zeitraum*) which was characterised by a linear narrative of progress (Osterhammel 2014, 68–69). Frank Hadler and Matthias Middell interpret such findings of shared experiences of Eastern European and non-European regions as evidence of the important function of a “hinge” that the history of East Central Europe could take on between “transnational history in a traditional Western vein and the coalition of global history and area studies” (Hadler and Middell 2010, 25). Just recently, historian Clara Frysztacka, with her book on notions of time in the Polish press of the nineteenth century, has made it impressively clear—using the conceptual toolkit of postcolonial theories—that locating oneself and others in temporal categories is an extremely powerful instrument in the struggle for recognition and for positioning in a Western narrative of progress. However, she also demonstrates that historical actors have also used “temporalisation” for self-empowerment and to challenge a supposedly universal time (Frysztacka 2020). Additionally, the specific spatial constitution of this region speaks for its consistent integration into global history. Again, reference should be made to Osterhammel, who describes the relationship between peripheries and centres as “the most important spatial configuration” in the nineteenth century, drawing attention to empires as the “largest and most important actors” (Osterhammel 2014, 78, 88).

Without a doubt, empires were the determining territorial framework for the whole of Eastern Europe until 1918. Of particular interest for regional studies is that the legacies of empires retained relevance for the shaping of new social and political orders even after their collapse. Here, the specific character of (Eastern) Europe’s spatial condition comes to the fore, as Stefan Troebst has described it: “The map of Eastern Europe as well as of the whole of Europe still resembles a palimpsest, that is, a medieval parchment manuscript whose original text has been removed and replaced by another” (Troebst 2000, 63). However, research should not be primarily concerned with mapping and border shifts, but rather with the spaces of experience and spaces for action of the historical actors; and those spaces mutated permanently due to the multiple interchanges of power and territorial overlaps. The Ukrainians, for instance, could be seen as a particularly striking example (but by no means an exceptional case) for this phenomenon. They have been confronted with multiple imperial overlaps: in early modern times by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Empire (Snyder 2003; Kappeler 2014); after the partitions of Poland a considerable part became the new Habsburg crownland

of Galicia and Lodomeria (Vushko 2015); after 1868 they had to grapple to a lesser extent with the Habsburg bureaucracy, and more with the claim to power of the Polish nobility, which had gained autonomy within the Cisleithanian part of the Dual Monarchy (Himka 1999; Wendland 2001); and after 1917, confronted by the complex process of the disintegration of the Russian Empire and the construction of the Soviet Union through Soviet Russian (neo-)imperialism (Wendland 2010) that has had a lasting effect until today.

In space, diverse experiences did coexist and overlap. The histories of contact with the alternating imperial powers cannot simply be told as a linear and temporally staggered succession. The “post” in post-imperial contexts, such as in the case of the Ruthenians/Ukrainians, carries the experience alongside previous forms of domination and thus refers to processes of entanglements rather than to fixed identities as units of investigation.

The Habsburg Monarchy seems to be a particularly fruitful field of investigation for authors who are interested in such entanglements. Pieter Judson’s survey of the Habsburg Monarchy (Judson 2016) may be considered a central work that examines negotiation processes against the backdrop of unequally distributed power resources. The author presents an analytical framework that does not focus on nationalism and the imperial counter-movements as indissoluble antagonisms, but rather questions the interactions between diverse social movements and the national and regional procedures by means of which social change was set in motion or shaped.

The Habsburg Empire of negotiations, regarding the Cisleithanian half of the empire and at least since 1867, sought ways to come to terms with diversity, which clearly represents a particularly productive field of research for postcolonial studies. Thus, authors refer especially to the aspect of interactional relations between rulers and the ruled, to the manifold processes of appropriation that took place in this network of relations, and to the ambivalences that arose from the attempt to regulate the diversity of the empire (Feichtinger et al. 2003; Kaps and Surman 2012). However, the multi-ethnic Russian Empire and likewise the German Empire with its large Polish-speaking population in the Prussian East also lend themselves to the testing of postcolonial perspectives.

But as different as the spaces for negotiation in the imperial relations of subordination were, as contrasting as today’s interpretative frameworks inspired by the perspective of postcolonial studies. For example, there

are studies that are examining Russian rule as colonial rule primarily in terms of the Russification and discursive marginalisation of the “Other,” such as in the studies of Ewa Thompson with regard to the position of non-Russian populations in the Russian Empire (Thompson 2000). Other authors present German policies towards Poland in the nineteenth century in a relatively one-sided manner, without asking about the repercussions on German society that resulted from contact with Polish-speaking populations (Kopp 2012). At the same time, there are studies that show that it was precisely these contacts with the “alterity partners” that had a lasting effect on the constitution of the German Reich and its self-image as a nation-state or empire (Ther 2004). Here, recent historiography has done much to break down the dichotomising juxtaposition of rulers and the ruled for both imperial and nation-state contexts. In these publications, the subalterns are not simply attributed agency in a romanticised manner, but, rather, authors elaborate on how historical actors were able to appropriate strategies of subversive complacency for their purposes and what kind of repercussions these appropriations had for the political centre.

Furthermore, research points to the adaptation of the subjugated to the centre and the shifting of the border into their own social space by these very subjugated. For the nineteenth century, this can be clearly seen in the discourses on hygiene (Turkowska 2020; Ureña Valerio 2019) in a German-Polish context; for the twentieth century, for instance, Kathryn Ciancia has pointed to a “universal language of civilisation” that, for example, Polish elites displayed towards the population in the Polish eastern territories during the period between the two World Wars (Ciancia 2021). For the post-socialist period, debates about the *homo sovieticus* developed amongst the self-proclaimed modern elites come to mind. They operated an image of individuals who, after the end of socialism, have remained stuck in their underclass identity dependent on the state because they failed to achieve cultural and socio-economic modernisation embodied by the “West” (Buchowski 2006).

EASTERN/EAST CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE “HYPERREAL EUROPE”

Thinking about the location of Eastern and East Central Europe in Europe has a long tradition and poses a challenge: both for the historical actors, who strive to position themselves against the respective current

background of experience, and for the academic observers, for whom a clear separation of concepts of historical actors and concepts of analysis is problematic. As early as the 1920s, the Russian linguist Nikolai Trubetskoi (1890–1938) had formulated a negative assessment of Europe, which he criticised for its discursive and normative hegemony. He pointed at the European view of the world, which tended to ignore specific characteristics in those regions that evidently did not belong to the European centre and, therefore, did not fit into the European scheme of knowledge. Criticising the Eurocentrism of the core Europe, he formulated his judgement: “European culture is not the culture of humankind; it is a product history of a very definite ethnic group” (Trubetskoi 1920, 5). The anti-communist émigré, Trubetskoi, argued from a cultural relativist or nativist point of view and did not spare biological analogies to denounce the European gesture of superiority and to emphasise Slavic distinctiveness vis-à-vis the “Romano-Germans” (ibid.). His analysis is both perceptive and disturbing at the same time, since he rightly points at the discursive and political dominance of the only apparently “unmarked” Europeans, while using biologist and racialised arguments to improve the situation of the subaltern “not yet” Europeans.

Eighty years later, the prominent postcolonial theorist of the colonial knowledge-power system, Dipesh Chakrabarty, warns against falling into precisely such patterns of essentialising one’s own culture. He pleads for understanding Europe as part of a global history and that it is precisely the actors outside the European centre who were and are involved in the creation of the construct of a “hyperreal Europe” through their permanent confrontation with it. With this notion, Chakrabarty refers to the epistemological power that is exercised when some categories and narratives—which certainly have a historical place/time and are transferred from there to other contexts—are set as universal and inescapable. From this perspective, Europe (which does not exist in this discursive ideal form) provides categories that the peripheral territories must correspond to or emulate (Chakrabarty 2007, 29–30). Maria Todorova argues similarly, when she points out that Southeastern and Eastern European studies have an important role to play in the “provincializing of Europe” called for by Chakrabarty: with the inclusion of Eastern European experiences, the overpowering European paradigm would be differentiated and become clearer in its historical situatedness (Todorova 2012, 74).

Another example from East Central Europe is used here to underline that it is difficult to demarcate Eastern Europe from Europe or from an

idealised “West,” but that these spatial constructs become tangible only in their permanent relationality. In a dispute on the “Prague Spring,” writers Milan Kundera and Václav Havel discuss the political significance of the reform movement in Czechoslovakia shortly after its suppression at the turn of 1968/1969. While Havel wanted to see it merely as a “return” to the democratic reality of the “West” (Havel 2008 [1969], 45–46), Kundera insisted on understanding the “Prague Spring” as an event of world-historical significance, as a unique attempt to counter the challenges of modern society with a programme that was both socialist and democratic (Kundera 2008 [1968/1969], 42–44; 47–49). As if under a magnifying glass, the indissoluble intertwining of the West with Eastern Europe becomes clear here. Havel, faring from modernisation theory, recognises a “rectifying revolution,” similarly to how German philosopher Jürgen Habermas diagnosed the events of 1989 (Habermas 1990). Kundera, in turn, insists on an independent contribution to historical development, which, however, can only be grasped in terms of the “West” (and reaffirms the “hyperreal Europe” precisely through its claimed originality).

This permanent relationality to the European “universality” reveals the heuristic potential inherent in postcolonial studies, which, like gender studies several years earlier (in the 1980s), contribute to a reconceptualisation of history by emphasising relationality and thus condition a specific perspective rather than a fixed object of research. It is precisely the spatial and historical proximity of East Central and Eastern Europe and the particularly intense debate about belonging and exclusion due to this proximity that, on the one hand, constantly affirm the “hyperreal Europe,” but, on the other hand, also open up an analytical space in which Europe becomes radically recognisable in its respective historical situatedness and thus visible as just another “province” of a fragmented world.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY OR WHY WE STILL NEED RELATIONAL HISTORY IN A POSTCOLONIAL VEIN

Arguably, an entangled history of relations coupled with postcolonial approaches can help us cope with present political challenges. Political scientists have recently made a sobering diagnosis of Eastern Europe and stated that since the end of the Cold War, Eastern Europe has found itself in an “era of imitation” (Krastev and Holmes 2020). From this

perspective, dissatisfaction with parliamentary liberal democracy would result from the fact that this political system has been presented to the transforming societies of East Central Europe as if without an alternative. But those who only imitate it, could not develop a positive attitude towards such a system. An intensified search for (ethnonational) identity was, therefore, the consequence (Krastev and Holmes 2020); something that we witness in today's Polish, Hungarian, and recently also Slovenian political landscape. This diagnosis, which has its merit, seems anyway to repeat the old pattern of profiling East Central Europe as prone to nationalism, instead of analysing the current contexts and complexities. And not without reason: political thinkers of the right in Poland already a good decade and a half ago argued for the return to supposedly genuine political traditions of their own that needed to be defended against the West (Krasnodębski 2003). It goes without saying that such a diagnosis uses argumentative patterns of postcolonial approaches in order to enforce a very specific political agenda. Therefore, we can observe how seemingly scholarly knowledge production is used for the political debate. Here again, a form of nativism shines through that theorists of post-colonialism warn against (Kołodziejczyk 2017). However, this nativism is not only the product of the “backward” attitudes in the East, but also an effect of the ignorance of Western opinion leaders who diagnose otherness but ignore the fact that they are also involved in the formation of these supposedly “cultural” antagonisms. Not to be misunderstood—I take a critical view of the complaints of East Central European critics of an alleged Western hegemony that supposedly keeps the region in a “peripheral” or inferior position even after the end of the Cold War. These complaints are part of an ethno-nationally narrow debate. This view must be countered by the fact that East Central Europe is by no means peripheral, but an integral part of a European history. This can only be understood by not thinking of Europe as a centre with peripheries, but, rather, by seeing the development of institutions and ideas as a process of interdependence.

To conclude, I will recapitulate why I consider postcolonial studies to be heuristically extremely productive as a research approach to East Central Europe. The multi-layered understanding of time inherent in the “post” of postcolonial studies is quite accurate for the complex situation of this region: in its case “after” does not merely mean “over” but implies the continued impact of historical experiences that shape the horizon of expectations of historical actors. This means that East Central Europe—or, more generally, any unit of investigation in the realm of

area studies—should not be viewed one-dimensionally as space, but as a space–time intertwining. In a recent research project that reflected on the future of area studies through the example of the specificity of East Central European border regions, this phenomenon was characterised as follows: “Former historical territories have the capacity to shape both the experience and the imagination of a social group and, consequently, to establish regional patterns in a specific domain. This capacity is not permanent but limited to specific historical moments. Phantom borders and phantom spaces appear and disappear depending on the historical and geopolitical circumstances” (Hirschhausen et al. 2019, 386).² In its constant (often asymmetrical) exchange with the “West,” East Central Europe is at the same time the object of universalising attributions, but also the subject that takes up these attributions, transforms them, and thus contributes to a more precise situating of the “West” that sees itself as producing universal categories. The history of East Central Europe, which is characterised by conflicts and dependencies, can be an excellent field of experimentation with the help of postcolonial studies, in which academia reflects on the always ambiguous character of knowledge production: new knowledge can criticise and reveal old dependency relationships, but, at the same time, it contributes to solidifying or creating new asymmetries of designation.

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² <http://phantomgrenzen.eu/> (accessed September 10, 2021).

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